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CNN Insight

The Instruments Of Espionage

Aired May 15, 2000 - 0:30 a.m. ET

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JONATHAN MANN, INSIGHT (voice-over): The instruments of espionage. There are secrets to the way spies ply their trade. Some you can learn. Some you can purchase.

(on camera): Hello, and welcome.

If you ever meet and talk to someone who does intelligence work, you'll probably be told that it is serious stuff - nothing at all like the movies. Too bad, because some of us like the movies and the tricks and the high-tech equipment that spies seem to have at their disposal.

The truth is, though, sometimes spies really do resort to cunning disguises and hidden cameras. On our program today - a look at what agents keep secret. CNN's Judy Woodruff begins our coverage.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

JUDY WOODRUFF, CNN CORRESPONDENT (voice-over): Antonio Mendez has been an artist most of his life, and today his paintings sell for thousands of dollars. However, it was not so long ago that his canvas took an entirely different form.

For years, instead of paintbrushes, Mendez used tools like rubber cement, scissors or a comb to craft his work for his employer, the CIA. His job was to create disguises, conjuring up such convincing new identities for agents that even their own families were not able to recognize them.

ANTONIO MENDEZ, FORMER CIA AGENT: I went back to Washington for 10 days of disguise training, and when I came back to Denver where my wife was waiting for me at the gate, at the airport, I did two things. I changed my hairline, and I put on a pair of glasses. But what I didn't do, is I didn't make eye contact. And I walked right past her just like this.

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WOODRUFF (on camera): There's a lens underneath there, right?

MENDEZ: Exactly, and what's going on here is there's an actuator in my pocket that is firing that lens, and that lens is part of a camera.

WOODRUFF: That's amazing. But you've got to be aiming it in the right direction.

MENDEZ: Yes, well, it takes a little practice, you know. Nobody said spying is going to be easy.

WOODRUFF (voice-over): He joined the CIA during the heyday of spy versus spy. His specialty was "exfiltration" -- getting friendly agents out of hostile territory. He plied his trade in all the hotspots of the Cold War, including Southeast Asia and Moscow.

This photograph was taken by Mendez. The little car next to the bus was being driven by KGB agents who were tailing him at the time.

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Exhibit B page 2 of 10

MENDEZ: Every day when you go to work, you're looking at an enemy that you can love to hate. That's part of the romance of it. And that was really great that, you know -- against the USSR, because they were static, and they were formidable and they were bent on our destruction, so everybody understood what the Cold War was about.

WOODRUFF: His most prominent mission did not involve Moscow, however, but another nemesis of the United States -- Iran. In 1979, when Iranian students took 52 Americans hostage, six U.S. embassy employees managed to escape and hide out at the homes of Canadian diplomats based in Tehran. The job of getting them safely out of Iran was assigned to Antonio Mendez.

MENDEZ: What I had to do was present an idea that was so interesting and so, you know, alluring that everybody could believe in it, and the idea of a motion picture scouting party was what I came up with.

WOODRUFF: Using a Canadian alias and passport, Mendez created a fake movie production company called "Studio Six." He made up a movie poster for the fictitious film and even took out ads in Hollywood trade papers, announcing the production. Then he flew to Iran with six fake Canadian passports and a risky plan.

MENDEZ: What you have to think about in these cases is what is the worst case? What happens if in fact, you know, you're all caught. What would they do? Obviously it would go badly for the six. It would go certainly badly for the two CIA officers -- myself and my partner -- because we were the ultimate Satan.

WOODRUFF: Mendez disguised the six American diplomats as Canadian filmmakers looking to make a movie in Iran. The ruse worked to get them out of the country, an accomplishment for which he received the CIA's Intelligence Star for Valor from President Carter.

(on camera): You're thinking about changing the way somebody looks. How do you do it?

MENDEZ: Well, what we do first is try to figure out what the problem is that we're trying to solve, and it's kind of like doing magic. You have to know where the audience is. And the audience may be in the round when you're surrounded by hostile surveillance, or it may be at one vantage point.

WOODRUFF (voice-over): Mendez believes that all it takes to change one's appearance is the subtle alteration of only a few features.

MENDEZ: What we would do, for instance, to change the mouth line is we might give you what we call a "plumper." This happens to be an ordinary Kleenex rolled up.

WOODRUFF: What do you do? You put it in the mouth to make the mouth look bigger?

MENDEZ: Yes, yes. And I can just show you how this would work here. If you stuff your mouth full of paper like that, the first thing you can see is my

-Exhibit B page 3 of 10

speech pattern is changing.

WOODRUFF: Are women harder than men, easier than men?

MENDEZ: Women have been at it much longer than men. I think women understand it, and it's a natural thing for them to do.

WOODRUFF: All right. If you were going to change me and you had to do it in just a few minutes, what would you do?

MENDEZ: Well, we hadn't met before, but it's not unusual for me to suddenly have this kind of situation, where you say we've got to get this person out of here, and so what I would do is grab whatever's available.

WOODRUFF (voice-over): Which is essentially what Mendez did. He gave me a new jacket.

MENDEZ: This is a very good piece of spy gear because it's bright and it's very compressible.

WOODRUFF: He covered up my blond hair.

MENDEZ: This is what we would call a detractor.

WOODRUFF: And changed my gender.

MENDEZ: You might go out with this in your hand.

WOODRUFF: I don't have to be a woman. I can be a guy.

MENDEZ: Exactly. At this point, we don't know. We might want to use something that I made up here, which we call a "Band-Aid mustache."

WOODRUFF: That's good. I think my husband will like this.

MENDEZ: And the whole point of it is, is that this hat, nose, sunglasses and everything are highly compact.

WOODRUFF: So went around the corner, if I turned around and came back...

MENDEZ: Yes.

WOODRUFF: ... and whipped these off...

MENDEZ: Yes.

WOODRUFF: ... take this back, get rid of the mustache, take off the jacket really fast, if I've got less than 60 seconds to do this.

MENDEZ: Yes, 45 seconds is the max, by the way. I've turned into a little old lady in 45 seconds.

Exhibit B page 4 of 10

WOODRUFF (voice-over): Mendez has a whole bag of tricks. He has made masks like this for agents.

(on camera): What do you think? Do you think CNN would hire me?

(voice-over): Or he can do something simple like slide this package of coins into a shoe to change my gait.

MENDEZ: And that just lays down in the bottom there.

WOODRUFF (on camera): But normally you'd give me two, right?

MENDEZ: No, no, one.

WOODRUFF: You'd just give one?

MENDEZ: Yes, that way you're going to favor that leg. There you go.

WOODRUFF: Hey, you're right about the -- it changes right away.

MENDEZ: Yes.

WOODRUFF (voice-over): This sort of deception came easy to Antonio Mendez.

MENDEZ: You are in-the-know, but you can't share that other than with your fellow officers. The ability to have a strong moral compass and know the difference between a lie that you should tell and one you shouldn't is very important.

WOODRUFF: After spending their career blurring truth and fiction, many retired agents are challenged by life after the CIA.

MENDEZ: Initially, I think there's a long period of decompression where you're kind of bouncing around.

WOODRUFF: Mendez has focused his energies on painting, writing a book called "Master of Disguise" and spending more time with his wife, Janna (ph), who is also a retired CIA agent and former chief of disguise.

JANNA MENDEZ, ANTONIO'S WIFE: There used to be a statistic in our office, in the office of technical service that retiring was like dying, because our retirees typically didn't live very long. I think 18 months was an average.

WOODRUFF (on camera): Is that right?

A. MENDEZ: Yes.

J. MENDEZ: It was like jumping off a speeding train, going from a hundred miles an hour to zero, and people that didn't have something to go to, that didn't have a life outside of their work, they did not do well at all

Exhibit B page 5 of 10
3/24/2004

WOODRUFF (voice-over): Still, 10 years after the "master of disguise" dropped his cover and picked up his paintbrushes, Antonio Mendez continues to carry a career full of memories, many that remain in the shadows.

A. MENDEZ: The operative word was "intrigue," and that word was the operative word every day for 25 years. It was intriguing, and every day you got a chance to get your hand on the lever, you know, to alter the course of world events. So it was great fun.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

MANN: We have to take a break. But when we come back, a look at a few items for the amateur, the professional and the paranoid. Stay with us.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

MANN (voice-over): Columbo - television private eye, solver of mysteries and a crime-fighting cultural ambassador to the world. The adventures of the private detective are among the best-known cultural exports of Hollywood, the kind of detective series that may have faded away, though the attraction of the deductive genius of these screen investigators, of course, lingers on.

(on camera): Welcome back.

It used to be that high-end surveillance equipment was available only for professional or military use. But new technology allows literally anyone to spy on a neighbor or anyone else at relatively low cost. There are now online sites where you can buy spying devices, such as spycompany.com, a U.S.-based Web site.

We spoke to the president and owner of the company about some of the products that he sells.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

HOWARD GOLDMAN, SPYCOMPANY.COM: This black box is a vehicle tracking system, and what's unique about it is that it can be attached magnetically to a vehicle in very little time and uses special GPS Web antenna - this is a proprietary antenna that we're fortunate enough to be the first with - that allows the antenna to be mounted under the car and still see the satellites in space that are handling the navigation system for the Pentagon.

Now, what this allows people to do, when this unit is placed on a vehicle, you can dial up an Internet Web site from any computer that's online and enter your password and ID and see the specific location of that vehicle, complete with (INAUDIBLE) descriptions and a color map.

It shows you the vehicle speed, the direction of travel, even the street address. And it also keeps a history of where the vehicle's been so you don't have to monitor it all the time. So that one has created a lot of excitement right now.

MANN: It's like out of a James Bond movie. What else do you have?

Exhibit B pg. 6 of 10

GOLDMAN: Well, another interesting product for the computer is a new software called PC Spy. And it's on a little floppy disk that behaves as a key, as a security key, so you never actually copy it onto a computer. To use it, you momentarily put it in the floppy drive and click and then remove it and put it back in your pocket. And it installs a hidden program on the computer that is completely undetectable, even by the newest virus scanning software.

What this program does once it's installed, it keeps a perfectly accurate record of every keystroke that's typed on that computer, including back spaces and revisions and typos.

This is - this is useful, at least we're finding the market has been home use as well as company use. Companies like to use it. For those companies that have the philosophy that they like to watch what's going on on their computer systems, they can see what's being typed on e-mail and chat, et cetera - everything, even if resumes are being created, which I think is one of the things they're interested in.

For home use, people use it to monitor their children's activities to see if they're going onto any Web sites that they may have forbidden them to go to, and spouses use it to see if their spouses are going to sites or if they're spending a little too much time on cyber chat. I think people have been buying it to get to the bottom of that as well.

MANN: So we can tell where people are traveling by car. We can tell where they're traveling in cyberspace. What else are you selling for people who want to look around and nose in on others?

GOLDMAN: Well, if you'd like to see how your phones are being used, without anybody else knowing that you have that information, we have a small, silent phone manager device that plugs into a phone line and keeps - stores up to 2,000 phone calls, including the date and time. The older models were big, clunky, noisy machines with big printers on them, where this is a little more stealth.

MANN: How many of these products are actually legal to use in the United States or anywhere else?

GOLDMAN: Well, all the - all the products are we handle are legal to possess and buy and sell and use in the United States. The United States has tighter - my understanding it has tighter regulations than many other parts of the world. So we're actually a little bit boring compared to what some of the overseas companies are handling.

But all these devices should be used with common sense, and if people are getting creative with their use, then we recommend they check their local laws and statutes.

MANN: Let me ask you, the word "creative" is an interesting one. Who is it that's buying these things and using them? Is it paranoid people? Is it jealous husbands? Is it nervous company owners?

GOLDMAN: Yes, definitely all of the above. You've nailed a big segment of our market. Not everybody describes their little details to us, but a lot of them

Exhibit B pg 7 of 10

do, and.

MANN: And are they going to spend hundreds or thousands?

GOLDMAN: Both. You know, individuals concerned with privacy in their home spend hundreds of dollars. Corporations often spend a lot more. Police agencies buy our products, so they've got a little bigger budget. Private investigators buy our products to use on multiple cases, so it pays - you know, they're just tools for them.

MANN: Howard Goldman, spycompany.com. Intriguing stuff. Thanks so much for being with us.

GOLDMAN: Well, thank you very much.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

MANN: We have to take a break. When we come back - the most expensive hidden cameras in the world. It turns out they may not be hidden after all. Stay with us.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

MANN (voice-over): A rocket heads into space with a spy satellite aboard. The satellite's mission - to peer down and gather intelligence. More than that, no one is supposed to know.

(on camera): Welcome back.

More and more nations are launching satellites, and private companies are now giving any willing buyer access to the pictures that their satellites take. But the most penetrating gaze and the best pictures belong to spy satellites that only a handful of countries can build. Part of their appeal is that spy satellites are supposed to travel over their target areas unannounced and undiscovered. They are spy satellites, after all.

Now it seems, though, some astronomy buffs and even students have learned the spies' secrets. Joining us to talk about that is Massimo Calabresi, foreign affairs and intelligence correspondent for Time magazine.

Thanks so much for being with us. I want to ask you, first of all, how ordinary people could even spot satellites in the sky.

MASSIMO CALABRESI, TIME MAGAZINE: Well, often if you're out at night and you're away from a city where there's particularly bright light, if you were to look up, you might see a small sort of pinprick of light moving rather rapidly across the sky. You'd have to be rather lucky to see it, but that object would be a satellite. It could, of course, be a communications satellite or it could, in fact, be a spy satellite.

MANN: So how much work goes into distinguishing a regular satellite from one that's more interesting and into figuring out where it's going and what it's seeing?

Exhibit B page 8 of 10

CALABRESI: Well, quite a bit of work. The amateur astronomers who specialize in tracking satellites are quite numerous and so can divide the work. Generally, they start by trying to figure out beforehand when a spy satellite is going to be launched. And then from data that the government releases ahead of time, they try to predict what its orbit will be, and then they mobilize their colleagues around the world to try and spot the satellite in the predicted orbit.

MANN: Who are these people?

CALABRESI: Well, it's quite a variety. There is a professor at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland who's particularly prolific at spotting orbiting objects. There is a research fellow at Smithsonian Harvard in Cambridge. There's an energy consultant who's very productive at this in Toronto. Just about anybody from scientists to complete amateurs and hobbyists.

MANN: Now, these are people working more or less in isolation in different parts of the planet. But as you mentioned, they pool their work and, in fact, they make it accessible to other people on at least one Web site that you mentioned in your report. What do you see when you look at these Web sites? How much information do they actually manage to put together on their own?

CALABRESI: Well, quite a bit. And my understanding is that it's also quite accurate. You can see at several of these Web sites specific orbital data which I certainly - and I think the majority of every day people would not be able to decipher. It gives very precise information about where and how quickly these objects orbit the earth.

There is more easy-to-understand information on some of these sites as well. Some sort of graphical representations of where the satellite is shown above the earth, indicates when light will be on the satellites, what parts of the earth the satellite itself might be able to view at that time.

MANN: How serious is this? How much does this undermine the job the satellites are sent up to do?

CALABRESI: Well, it depends who you talk to. There are a small number of people in the intelligence community who are quite unhappy about this. They say that it gives too much information to the people that they are trying to spy on, makes it difficult for them to do their job.

On the other hand, most of the people I spoke with for this article, including some people in the intelligence community, say it's just a fact of life that these objects are too large, too easy to see and the nature of what they're required to do makes them visible to amateurs. And certainly, the amateurs themselves say, well, if we can do it with a pair of binoculars, then certainly a country with the resources that it would have at its disposal can do the same.

Other people in the intelligence community, though, it's worth noting, use the fact that these individual spy satellites can be spotted so easily as an argument for spending more money to build more satellites so that basically every spot on earth would be visible at any time to United States intelligence workers.

MANN: It raises a question. We have just a moment left. But if people can

Exhibit B page 9 of 10

buy satellite pictures and if people who are being spied on know that they're being watched, is there any point to satellites anymore of this kind? Ordinary people are going to have access to more than enough information simply by going to commercial providers.

CALABRESI: Well, it's a bit of a debate at the moment in the intelligence community. There certainly are those who say that's the future - commercial satellite imagery is the future. For the time being, the United States certainly still has a step up on the commercial satellites - higher resolution and also some ones that do things, that take certain kinds of pictures that the commercial satellites can't take. But in the future, it may very well be privatized.

MANN: Massimo Calabresi of Time magazine, thanks so much for this.

CALABRESI: Thank you.

MANN: That's INSIGHT for this day. I'm Jonathan Mann. More news just ahead.

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